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No 8049.109



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MAR 5 1930

APR 21 1930

THE NEAPOLITAN SCHOOL.

A LECTURE

ON THE

ART OF SINGING

BY

VINCENZO GIRILLO.



BOSTON:

GEORGE H. ELLIS, 121 FRANKLIN STREET.

1882.

THE NEAPOLITAN SCHOOL.

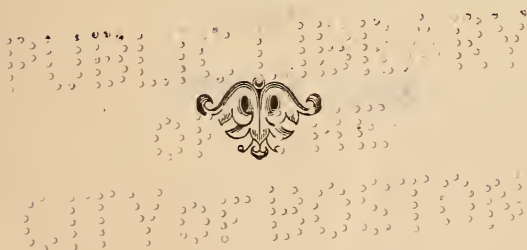
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TO MY FRIEND AND PUPIL,

J. FRANK BOTUME,

whose interest in and quick appreciation of the vocal art, as taught
by the Neapolitan masters, have ever been assured me,

I offer this little commentary on that art,
in the familiar form of lecture.

VINCENZO CIRILLO.

BOSTON, MASS., March, 1882.



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THE NEAPOLITAN SCHOOL.

THE art of singing, like all arts, has had its fluctuations; and at some periods of its history it has flourished, as it has decayed at others, influenced by its political and social surroundings, which were sometimes favorable and sometimes adverse.

There have been periods in the past when the courts of Europe assisted the arts by their generous patronage and favor, and at those periods we find the art of singing at its height. The most famous singers were then honored by lucrative positions at court. For instance, the court of Rome formerly had as its private singers many famous artists, of whom perhaps the greatest was Palestrina.

It is not my intention to give in this lecture an historical sketch of the art and its artists, but to summarize in a general way the principles which I learned as a pupil, and which have been tested by an experience in teaching and singing that has already lasted a quarter of a century.

I shall speak of my teachers, and of the method of instruction which was and is adopted by the Royal College of Music at Naples, where the celebrated male soprano, Crescentini, after an illustrious career in the principal theatres of Europe, established in his old age his school of singing. His worthy successor was his most faithful pupil,—my beloved teacher,—Alessandro Busti.

It would be a tedious task, and one well-nigh impossible, to enumerate the many famous singers who have sprung from this school; but I will mention, in passing, the great Lablache, who was a pupil of Crescentini.

This school is based upon the transmitted teaching and experience of a line of teachers which extends back for more than three hundred years. It passed by the living voice from teacher to pupil, gathering in its descent the accumulated traditions of many generations. In this way it was acquired by Crescentini, in this way it was taught to Busti, and so it came to me.

In opposition to this manner of acquiring the art of singing from the living voice of the teacher, we have in modern times an innumerable number of written “methods” (so called); and Busti, in the last years of his life, said that the crowd of methods, which began then to make their appearance for the first time, would be for the art of singing so many

tongues, so many dialects, which he predicted would cause in a short time another tower of Babel, a chaos of ideas, of principles, of rules, of hobbies. I can bear witness to the fulfilment of this prophecy.

When I first came to this country, in 1872, to assume the professorship of singing at the National College of Music in Boston, I hoped and expected to find a virgin soil ready to receive the seeds which I brought with me from Italy, and to bring forth the true fruit. What, then, was my astonishment, on entering the store of Messrs. Oliver Ditson & Co., to read, in large letters, the two words "VOICE-BUILDING." As I understood English very imperfectly at that time, I asked my friend, Mr. Charles R. Hayden, who was showing me the place, the meaning of those two words. He answered that, although a native of this country and a good American, he could not possibly give me the signification of the sentence. This bright answer first directed my attention to the army of methodists, of innovators, of reformators, of builders of the human voice, of which this country is even fuller than Europe. Seeing this, and remembering the wise prophecy of my teacher, Busti, I decided, after a year of teaching in the College, to abandon my position, and as a private teacher to present my ideas, which were in direct opposition to the prevailing current; and from that time to the present (a period

of ten years) I have taught what I understood to be the true school, with results which I think have been satisfactory to my pupils.

Without attempting to discuss or criticise the ideas of my colleagues and contemporaries, I will endeavor to explain the principles which I have learned from my teachers and acquired during my experience in teaching.

It is impossible in Italy to teach any art by a written method, because the Italian mind is not scientific, but artistic. It sees the beautiful intuitively, it does not reason it out. In this respect, the Italians differ from all other races, even from the Spanish and French, who have the same Latin blood, and belong to the same family. Here, I may observe that these two races have no school of their own. Their famous singers studied in Italy and sang Italian operas, although they could never rival the Italian singers, who were always the most famous in the world.

We will not compare the different races in respect to their musical ability, for comparisons are always odious; but it may be said that the intuitive school of teaching ceases with the Italians, to whom music is a second nature, and all other races have to get into the mysteries of the art step by step.

I have observed, since the very beginning of my experience as a teacher in this country, that there

is an instinct in the American people which makes them ask the "why" of everything new that is taught them, particularly when they are studying an art. It seems as though they wished to reduce all beauty to theory and rules; but they are mistaken, for science is not art, and the old masters taught the art in two words,—namely, "Imitate me." This was the school of Nuzar, given to his pupils; this was the school of Porpora, and also the school that made Michelangelo, Raffaello, Benvenuto Cellini, and many others.

But what can be done with a pupil who asks at the first lesson: "What is your method of breathing?" "Do you want me to breathe from the diaphragm or from my intercostal muscles or from my abdomen?" "What is your method?" "How long does it take to become a perfect singer?" "What do you call my voice?" "To what celebrated artist's voice can mine be compared?" "Do you teach the oratorio voice? I mean that broad voice, rather solemn and pompous?" "How long shall you require me to practise every day?" And many other questions of the same kind.

Some of the most important of these I will endeavor to answer:—

Speaking of the art of breathing, the celebrated Romani, of Florence, used to say that he to whom nature has refused the gift of breathing has no

remedy except to die, and ask for somebody to bury him. I say to my pupils, "Breathe naturally, without any straining of the diaphragm in holding and emitting the breath already stored in the lungs." Those who have naturally a weak physical constitution must gradually gain strength by practising five or ten minutes at first, repeating this at the utmost no more than four times a day. In fact, the professional singer never extends his practice beyond thirty minutes at a time. This system is the one generally adopted by all Italian singers, and is the one I recommend to my pupils. It is folly to pretend to set any definite length of time for the complete development of the voice; for it is not the teacher or the pupil who decides this, but the organic conditions of the larynx, the lungs, the diaphragm, and in short of all the vital forces of the body. And on this point I may quote the celebrated Lablache, who said that singing was altogether the business of the nerves.

In following this system of natural development, the voice gains day by day a new form, a new timbre, a new life, a new character. In my experience, I have had several cases of voices low at first becoming high, and *vice versa*. The old masters of singing would not allow themselves to decide upon the range of the pupil's voice until the end of three years of constant study. The great singers of the

past centuries made their début only at the end of from five to seven years of regular and laborious work. The vocal pupils of the Royal College of Music at Naples were graduated at the age of thirty. During their course, they studied not only the voice, but also harmony, counterpoint, piano-forte or some stringed instrument, literature, poetry, history, mythology, and declamation; while nowadays we frequently find singers who are even ignorant of the signification of the words which they sing, of the musical phrase which they attempt to express, thus marring very often the dramatic effect of the song by breathing in the middle of the musical period.

Here, I return again to the questions asked me by my pupils. Some ask whether they must practise with the mouth shut or the mouth open; whether to give the lips a smiling position, as in singing *eh*, or a round position, as in singing *oh*,—whether I admit the existence of the three registers in the human voice; whether I teach the falsetto voice or the chest voice, and other questions of the same kind, all requiring a patient answer, with examples sufficient to convince them and make them stop talking. It is my conviction that all these ideas came from their former teachers, who had used them as corner-stones on which they intended to build the voices of their pupils.

The only builder of the human voice that I believe

{ in is the Supreme Maker of all things in this world. { Those who usurp the functions of nature, and pretend that they can build voices, claim power not given to man. These self-styled voice-builders had better leave their hobby, and carefully study the school which has not been the result of any one man's experiments, but which represents the accumulated experience of our ancestors. This school has given much to art and to artists, as we can learn by reading the annals of all the great theatres of the Old World.

This art of educating the human voice consists first in sustaining separately each note of the diatonic scale, keeping well within the vocal range of the pupil, starting the sound very gently, and gradually giving the *crescendo* and *diminuendo*, being careful not to force or prolong the tone beyond the natural strength of the lungs. This, in Italian, is called the "study of the *nessa di voce*," the placing of the voice. Lablache asserted that the main cause of the wonderful power and flexibility of his voice was the constant and daily practice of the sustained scale, with the *crescendo* and *diminuendo*.

Next to this comes the study of the intervals, then that of the major, minor, and chromatic scales, then arpeggios, turns, syncopated notes, and finally the trill. This is the brilliant *solitaire* which adorns the scarf of a young dandy, and puts the finishing touch to his toilet.

After the above, it is necessary to study vocalizations, selecting written melodies by the masters of the art, such as Crescentini, Righini, Busti, Concone, Panofka, Lamperti, and others. Of these exercises, the pupil should select those best adapted to his or her voice. This practice should never be stopped, no matter how far advanced the pupil may be, the old saying of the Neapolitan school being that whoever vocalizes sings (*"Chi vocalizza canta"*). This practice will instruct the pupil in the knowledge of musical phrases or periods, enabling him to sing them with correctness of breathing, of accent, of expression. Next to this comes singing with words. My teacher, Busti, used to say that, when the words are well pronounced, with pure accent, the piece of music is half-learned. I find the recitative the most fitting means for the beginner to acquire a good pronunciation. After this, he may take up songs.

It is worth while to notice here that the singers of the old school took great pride in being able to move their audience by the correct enunciation and accentuation of a dramatic recitative, and would often vie with each other, trying to see which could render some particular phrase the most effectively. I remember with pleasure hearing one evening the great Tamberlik, at the Boston theatre, in *Lucia di Lammermoor*. When he came to the words, "*E me nel pianto abbandoni così !*" he brought tears to my eyes,

and by that one phrase compelled me to recognize in him the artist who knew how to render the recitative to perfection. Many modern singers of repute sing with so bad a pronunciation that it is almost impossible to understand the meaning of the words. One evening, I attended the performance of *Lucrezia Borgia*, which was sung in various tongues, for the reason that the artists belonged to different troupes. I can frankly say that, while they sang in German, in English, and in Italian, for me it was all one tongue; and I could hardly distinguish which was singing in German, which in English, and which in Italian, although the singers were all accomplished artists. It is an easy thing to say, "Pronounce distinctly," but a correct pronunciation requires fully as long and careful study as good vocalization. The combination of both makes the perfect artist.

In arranging modern languages categorically with reference to their adaptability for singing, I would place first the Italian, then Spanish, French, English, and German in order. The Italian language is easier to sing than the others, on account of the small number of vowel sounds in its alphabet, which are five; namely, a, e, i, o, u (ah, eh, ee, oh, oo). These vowel sounds are all formed in the mouth, none of them being in the slightest degree throaty or nasal, as are many of the vowels of other languages.

In vocalizing, we must use a compound vowel-sound made up of all the vowel-sounds of the Italian idiom. This is the mystery of the voice in which many ministers of the art are confounded to such an extent that they sometimes ruin voices by compelling them to adopt an unnatural vowel for the production of tone. This vowel-tone can only be communicated to the pupil by the expert teacher through the medium of his living voice; and when the pupil has imitated the teacher to perfection in this, then he first begins to sing.

This compound tone should be formed within the back cavity of the mouth, which is located behind the uvula, and connects with the pharynx; and thence the vibrations should spread into the front cavity of the mouth, striking against the hard palate, with an inclination toward the frontal bones and the various cavities of the skull, all of which assist in giving quality to the tone. The cavity of the chest, and in fact those in the entire trunk, are of great assistance in giving fulness and roundness to the tone.

By following this system of developing the voice there disappears any necessity of discussion concerning head medium and chest registers, which many teachers cultivate and impose upon the voice; and in this way the voice will acquire a homogeneous tone and character, enabling the pupil to ex-

press the inner sentiments of the soul, which will thus be spontaneously displayed by the singer, and not produced by any artificial means, which are often more disagreeable than pleasant to the ear.

Speaking of registers, I may say that all voices have naturally at least three different registers, or timbres, or qualities. These are more perceptible in the soprano, and gradually less prominent in the mezzo-soprano, contralto, tenor, baritone, and bass. There are two additional registers sometimes to be met with: the first occurs in exceptionally high soprano voices, and is called *sopracuto*; the other, in deep bass voices, and is called *doppiobasso*. It is the duty of the skilful teacher, from the very beginning, to unite and mingle these registers by the study and constant use of the compact sound formed by the five vowels of the Italian alphabet.

When the pupil, by following the foregoing system, has rendered his voice flexible and fitted to give with ease either the *pianissimo* or the *fortissimo*, I can warrant him that his voice can make itself distinctly heard among those of a hundred uncultivated singers, like a cornet among a hundred stringed instruments. This was shown at the time of the Boston Jubilee, when the voices of the leading artists were heard above the volume of the immense chorus. This system will secure to the pupil a correct emission of the tone, which the Italians call *imposto di*

voce, assisting him to sing in tune and preventing his voice from cracking or breaking. The placing of the voice must always be accompanied in singing both *forte* and *piano* by a full supply of breath, which should be easily and flexibly taken and economically used. We may notice a similarity in this respect between the breath and the steam in a steam-engine, which operates in a hundred different parts of the machine in many different ways, but always in virtue of the pressure in the boiler.

The art of singing does not cease with the correct use of the vocal mechanism: there is something more to be added. Before the singer can become an artist, he must go into the æsthetics of the subject, distinguishing a brilliant from a pathetic style, and giving to each composition its own peculiar rendering, whether tragic, comic, religious, diabolic, romantic, etc. A well-gifted singer of fine musical instinct and a sublime nature can sometimes, by his rendering of a composition, reveal beauties unknown even to the composer. In fact, who made Rossini, that great composer, the greatest of his time? I answer, Malibran, Pasta, Grisi, Lablache, Mario, Rubini, and others of equal merit, who enhanced and almost created the beauties of his compositions. His music would be performed oftener to-day, were there more singers capable of conquering its difficulties. The singer, for me, is the second com-

poser of the piece which he sings ; and, if the singing-school nowadays is in decay, one cause of it may perhaps lie in the great scarcity of singers who understand the art of composition.

I know by my own experience that nine-tenths of our modern singers scarcely know the first rudiments of music, singing, like blind people, with the help of the ear, which often betrays them. For this reason, modern composers are obliged to mark all the signs of expression and *coloratura* on the musical score ; while the old masters trusted this entirely to the skill of the artists, each one of whom gave his own interpretation, doing his best to present the most artistic and impressive rendering of the piece. The *cadenza* was then composed entirely by the singer, who, free to finish the piece in his own way, often introduced a different one each time he repeated the composition. This privilege is to-day utterly done away with, because the singers cannot create a *cadenza* which would be appropriate to the sentiment of the composition.

The *cadenza* is the feather which adorns the hat of the stylish lady ; it is the necklace of pearls which clasps the enameled neck of the Margherita ; it is the brilliant ending which marks the climax of the piece and insures its success.

Most modern singers have little or no individuality of style ; but each follows his or her predecessor in

the same monotonous, traditional rendering of the same music, all singing like parrots.

Here, I would like to give a short sketch of some of the artists who have represented what a singer should be, beginning with Alessandro Stradella, who was a great singer, and gave to the art, besides his singing, 11 dramatic operas, 6 sacred oratorios, 20 church pieces, 8 cantatas, 3 mottettos, and 18 instrumental overtures. These works are deposited in the library of San Marco at Venice. There are other compositions of the same author deposited in the library of the Liceo Filarmonico of the same city.

I will also mention my fellow-citizen, Farinelli, the celebrated male soprano, born in 1705, whose true name was Carlo Broschi. At that time, it was customary for the public to give to noted musicians *agnome*, or surnames; and so Broschi was called Farinelli, because his father was a dealer in *farina* (flour). His teacher, Porpora, was still another example of what a great vocalist may be; for he united in himself the varied accomplishments of teacher and composer, and history says that Porpora and Sarri were the first to give simplicity to the harmony, elegance to the melody, and fluency to the musical form of that time.

Farinelli made his début in Rome in 1721, at the age of sixteen, in his teacher's opera, *Eumene*.

His execution was so perfect that in the theatre Aliberti, in a contest with a celebrated trumpet-player, he was not only able to vie with his opponent in agility, but even surpassed him in the control of his breath, adding trills and runs long after the trumpeter had been compelled to stop for want of breath, and only finishing when compelled by the shouts of the audience. Such a performance seems incredible, and would certainly be an impossibility to any modern singer. After continued triumphs in Italy and Germany, he went to London, where he created such a tremendous excitement in his audience that a noble lady of the court leaned from her box, and shouted in the midst of the tumult, "*Il n'y a qu'un Dieu et qu'un Farinelli!*" (There is but one God and one Farinelli!) In 1736, he went to Paris, where he so strongly affected Louis XV., that anti-musical monarch, that he gave him his portrait set with diamonds and five hundred louis d'or. Thence going to Madrid, he cured Philip V., by the sweetness of his singing, of a melancholy which had affected him for years. The monarch was so charmed by his voice that he made him his private singer, at the salary of fifty thousand francs a year; and his talents and character soon gained him the position of prime minister, which he held till the end of the reign of Philip's successor, Ferdinand VI. He then retired to Bologna, where he died, almost surfeited with honors and wealth, in 1782.

Another celebrated male soprano was Caffarelli, who was also from my birthplace. His true name was Gaetano Majorana. He was born in 1703. His father was a poor peasant. Porpora was his teacher, and the story of how he made his pupil study for five years the same page of exercises is well known. Porpora understood that his pupil was a natural musical genius, and so kept him for this long period upon the mechanical training of the voice, and at the end of the time said: "Go, my son! I have nothing more to teach you. You are the first singer of the world." The natural beauty of his voice and the perfection of his singing combined with his personal attractiveness to insure his success. In 1724, at the age of twenty-one, he was received with great enthusiasm in Rome, following this by successive triumphs in London, Venice, Madrid, and the court of France. He kept his voice to an advanced age, and lived luxuriously at Naples, enjoying the estate and title of Duke of St. Donato, which he had purchased by his wealth, and often expressed his sorrow that future generations would not be able to understand the wonderful beauty of his voice. He died in 1783. It is a peculiar coincidence that Farinelli and Caffarelli were born in the same place within three years of each other, and died only a year apart.

I have no time to speak at length of the merits of

other artists who followed these, but I may mention, in passing, Giuseppe Aprile, who was a great singer and composer, and whose *Vocalises* are still used at the College of Naples, where he was educated; and Giuseppe Millico, who enjoyed the confidence of Gluck to such an extent that he intrusted to him the musical education of his niece, who became a celebrated singer. This Millico was not only a famous singer, but a distinguished harpist as well, and left a large number of sonatas for his instrument, besides two successful operas. Finally, I may be allowed to remind you that Balfe was not only a composer of beautiful operas, but also an elegant singer, and sang with great success on the stage before devoting himself to the composition of operas.

But what is the use of repeating here the glories of generations that are past? It is our business to-day to elevate the art to that height which every admirer of the beautiful seeks and claims for it. Why should not the divine art of singing find here the same encouragement that other arts have found by the establishment of free institutions, which may develop the native talent that surely exists in this country? The constant political agitations and revolutions of Europe have disturbed and almost stopped the progress of the art. The courts, both spiritual and temporal, which once gave a generous patronage to music, are now occupied in endeavoring to preserve their own

foundations, and the mind of the people is too full of the religious and political questions of the day to think of art.

Beautiful singing is not a mere accomplishment: it is rather a necessity, for it comes to refresh us when we are tired and almost sick of the constant strain of every-day life; and rich America should do something to assist those who are destined by nature to belong to the army of musicians. Why should we send every year to Italy, France, England, and Germany hundreds of young Americans, simply to get a musical education? Why should we allow to Europeans a monopoly in the production of opera in this country, when America might educate her own singers without christening them in Europe, which is not always a benefit, sometimes making them so ashamed of their own country that they are obliged to assume Italian or French names?

The many music halls and theatres already built in the various large cities of the Union open a vast field for any young American who is sufficiently well educated to start a musical career. This is the country of great enterprises; and when I consider how many fine voices there are here, and that some of them are renowned abroad, I am sure that any attempt to develop our native talent by institutions similar to those in Europe would be a great success.

The interest I feel in the establishment of these

free vocal and musical schools in America is caused by the fact that, in my own experience here, I have seen many possessors of beautiful voices who, for lack of means, have been obliged to stop their musical education at the end, perhaps, of a very few months; and, if some of them have been enabled to pursue their studies to the point of doing pretty well, the need of money has drawn them prematurely into the vortex of professional life, thus spoiling many a promising artist.

My own musical education during six years was given to me gratis by the Royal College at Naples, where I had the opportunity of studying under the great Mercadante and others. There, I studied singing, piano-forte, harmony, counterpoint, mathematics, philosophy, Latin, French, and stage declamation. There, I had the opportunity of taking part in the little theatre of the College, both in plays and operas, and of producing my first orchestral works. In short, there I received my complete musical education.

The American musical public school or college should be so conducted as to give to the pupil his musical education thoroughly and gradually, without any precipitation or undue haste; and the pupil should not receive his diploma until he could show by his works that he was a competent musician and artist. For while the voice develops much more rap-

idly in some than in others, and no stated time can be given for the complete training of the vocal organ, still it may be truly said that in America the voice, as a rule, continues to develop and improve from the age of eighteen to that of twenty-five; and the singer who goes on the stage before the latter age generally makes a mistake.

Let such institutions be once established, and they will put an end to the monopoly now enjoyed by foreign impresarios, who make us pay a very dear price for the privilege of listening to their imported singers. With such a school, we shall soon have an opera distinctively American, like the Italian opera in Italy, the French opera in France, the German opera in Germany, and the same in other countries.

I would remind those interested in the choral societies now flourishing here, that, in order to promote the success of choral music, it is not enough to add to the number of the clubs already existing under various names and for various purposes. We need choral schools, like those established in France and in Belgium, to educate the masses to read music without the aid of any instrument, and to perform the most difficult works of the great masters, such as Palestrina, Marcello, and others.

In closing, I would like to say a word about the wide-spread prejudice existing among students concerning the great and fundamental difference which

they conceive to exist between the styles required for the rendering of chamber music, church or oratorio music, and operatic music. The art is one; and, when the artist is in possession of it, it will be for him one language, that which speaks to the human heart, and speaks with one accent, with one power. The great Leopardi said, "Cry, if you want others to cry, and laugh, if you want others to laugh"; and I am sure that, when we all appear before the Supreme Ruler of the universe to join the heavenly host, and our hearts are filled with joy and thanksgiving, we shall not need then the assistance of any especial study of the oratorio style in order to shout in unison with the whole angelic choir, "Hallelujah, for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth, and he shall reign for ever and ever."

BOSTON, MASS., March, 1882.

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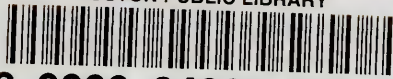
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